



1981

## Violet Clay by Gail Godwin

Katherine Frank

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/ijls>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Frank, Katherine. "Violet Clay by Gail Godwin." *Iowa Journal of Literary Studies* 3 (1981): 118-122.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0743-2747.1040>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Iowa Journal of Literary Studies by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

*Violet Clay: Portrait of the Artist as a Woman*

A LITTLE MORE than a year ago I read Erica Jong's *How to Save Your Own Life* in one crack on a seven-hour flight from London to Chicago. Reviews had warned me it would be dreadful, and for the most part it was; yet I kept at it while the first volume of Virginia Woolf's diary remained shut up in my overnight bag. Undoubtedly Jong's soft-core pornography helps to explain my engrossment, but I think there was more than titillation or even the ennui of jet travel involved. As those who have read *Fear of Flying* will recall, Jong's autobiographical heroine, Isadora Wing, is a poet and novelist struggling to find her own voice. A former neoclassicist from Columbia, she dares to metamorphose into what we all secretly aspire to be: not a critic or scholar, but a real writer. At the end of Jong's first installment, we leave Isadora menstruating in a warm bath, her sexual and literary future somewhat uncertain, but surely promising, giving the symbolic, purgative nature of her situation in the last chapter.

What, then, transpires in the continuation? "Candida Confesses" (*Fear of Flying*) has become a bestseller, but success and fame, Isadora soon discovers, can be as vacuous and enervating as the Ph.D. program at Columbia. She leaves her Chinese psychiatrist husband, tries lesbianism, participates in an orgy, and finally winds up with a boyish, bearded male from southern California. Presumably she is still writing, but the salvation of the novel's title is effected, as it so often is for women in fiction, by a man, and through a Lawrentian surrender to sexual apocalypse.

Jong's book is merely one rather egregious example of a fictional pattern that has been explored by a number of more gifted novelists. But Jong is peculiar in at least initially attempting to make her heroine an artist. (Jane Gray in Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall* is also a poet, but Drabble scarcely touches on her writing.) We actually see Isadora writing poetry in *Fear of Flying*, and at one point we catch her attempting to read *Ulysses*. I imagine this last was just a flashy bit to prove her intellectual credentials. I wish, instead, that she had taken up the far more manageable *A Portrait of the Artist*, for if she had, she might have discovered some clues to avert her subsequent "salvation" of flying from one man to another. The artist survives, Stephen Dedalus affirms, only in solitary dedication to his vocation: through "silence, exile, and cunning."

This is the "how to save your own life" revelation of *Violet Clay*, a deeply moving, brilliant novel that is the first real female *künstlerroman*. At thirty-two, Godwin's heroine is no longer a young artist. Like so many women, she has made a number of time-consuming detours on the road to con-

fronting her destiny: an early marriage and divorce, a series of disastrous love affairs, and nine long years of prostituting her talent by illustrating the covers of Gothic romances for a New York publishing company appropriately named Harrow House. And Violet has also been on the lookout for a man to unbury her obstinately elusive "better self," a mentor and lover to play Stieglitz to her Georgia O'Keeffe, just as the George Eliot scholar in Godwin's *The Odd Woman* yearns for another G. H. Lewes.

But the decisive male in Violet's life is no master-savior. Instead, it is her beloved Uncle Ambrose, a failed novelist whose suicide finally jolts Violet out of her passive attendance on the spark from heaven. When Ambrose puts a bullet through his skull in a cabin in the Adirondacks, Violet abandons New York and moves into his cabin in the woods. In the silence and isolation of her exile, she struggles to discover the cunning and craft and nerve that will save her from Ambrose's fate. "We must press on," he had written her in a postcard several months before his death. But his final message is his terse suicide note: "There's nothing left." The novel charts Violet's vacillation between these two communications.

She is brave enough to try to defy the wreck of the past nine years, to forego the soothing companionship of the vodka bottle, to assume at least temporarily that something is left for her. But how does one press on? How, in particular, does a woman artist with a flair for inertia and self-pity press on? For one, she must stop looking for Stieglitz, Lewes, Leonard Woolf, and all the other masculine angels and muses the imagination conjures as the solution. With the single exception of the asexual novelist Milo, all the men in Violet's life are failed artists who not only distract her from her vocation, but also pull her into the vortex of their own defeats—the musician Jake, the cynical artist Ivor, even Violet's alter-ego Ambrose, whom she had always believed stood between her and "dark, hopeless space . . . the void."

Free of these men, of her fantasies of Stieglitz on a white horse, and banning even her desire to find comfort with the state trooper who investigated Ambrose's death, Violet slowly, painfully, learns that solitude, fearful isolation, is the first necessary condition for creation. And in the land of exile in her cabin in Plommet Falls, Violet also faces solitude's terror of failure, and glimpses the rationale behind Ambrose's abdication. "Whatever had given me the inflated notion of myself as a person who might send light into the darkness of other people's hearts by making marks on paper?" Failure of will, and then the desire to destroy the will that is so fainthearted: "I drove into the village, wishing with all my heart I could be someone else. Or even nobody. Today it really hit me how someone could get so sick of his same old act—the false starts, the fresh failures, the noble resolutions leading in turn to new false hopes and starts—that he'd prefer to have done with it altogether." Violet presses on only at the risk of finding nothingness within.

Joan Didion has described writing as a violation, as an act of nearly megalomaniacal presumption, and I imagine this hubris of creative activity is even more prevalent, or at least more debilitating, among women than men. The fact is that female artists are still often viewed as anomalies, even freaks: Johnson's dog dancing on its hind legs syndrome. Violet, as one of her lovers observes, is given to "Poor Little Me jags." And she herself concedes, "the grooves of my mind were more accustomed to the concept of Violet Clay as victim than as victress." How on earth can this woman, this bundle of abortive attempts, grandiose delusions, and foolhardy aspirations, dare to express and impose her vision on others?

Oddly enough, the paralyzing egoism of her work that threatens Violet is circumvented, triumphed over, only through self-forgetfulness—but immersing herself so deeply in her vision that creator and creation become one and artistic self-consciousness is shed in the moment of illumination. This movement from aesthetic narcissism to the liberation of self-transcending creation is beautifully traced in the novel through Violet's series of self-portraits and her final "break-through" work "Suspended Woman." We first encounter Violet painting her last Gothic cover from a snapshot of herself, her own head perched on top of the standard Gothic heroine fleeing from a sinister mansion. During her early years in New York, Violet had attempted a more ambitious self-portrait inspired by Holbein. The latter is abandoned when she rhetorically wonders, "What about me was interesting enough to commit in oil pigment to canvas?" And the Gothic cover she mercilessly defaces after losing her job with Harrow House.

Yet despite these failures, Violet makes one last effort to "record her self-concept for posterity." On the night of Ambrose's suicide she lies awake in the dark and conceives the abstract "Violet in Blue:" "the painting would have only the color violet, consumed in many tones, a color sometimes greedy with impasto, trying to steal center stage with the violence of its caked force; at other times flattened to near extinction by the equanimity of the blue; and—at a spot where the eye would want to return again—achieving finally a lover's merger, so that blue is deepened by Violet's shadow and her imprint is left on the long night of his memory." Well, don't we all wish to carve out our space, impress our imprint on the equanimity of the blue?

It is a magnificent conception—one imagines a vast Frankenthaler canvas—and Violet labors hard and with some inspiration on "Violet in Blue" after arriving in the woods. But the results are curiously sterile and disappointing, even crude. Though an abstract rather than a realistic portrait, "Violet in Blue" is as narcissistic as her previous attempts. Violet is trying to create as well as record herself on the canvas. And despite her Poor Little Me jags, she has long known that revelation is born of the blessed state of egolessness rather than obsession with self. "Often in the

city, even when painting my fleeing maidens, I'd wander into the bathroom the way some people go out for a stroll and look at myself in the mirror and be amazed at how the blood was up in my face. I was often amazed to see any reflection at all, I had so forgotten myself in the stimulation of painting."

The climax of Violet's liberation from the prison of artistic self-consciousness occurs when she reenacts Ambrose's suicide. It is a highly symbolic but also wonderfully realistic scene. In a funk one evening shortly after it has become apparent that "Violet in Blue" will never realize its grand promise, Violet lies down on the cabin floor with Ambrose's German Luger (minus its firing pin which had been removed by the state trooper) in her hand. She imagines how Ambrose must have felt, how she would feel if the firing pin were still intact and she had not already determined to be "practical since we have decided not to kill ourselves. We are not yet finished and tomorrow might well be another day." There is no intention in Violet's pantomime, and yet the scene constitutes a kind of psychic suicide, a killing off of all the solipsistic self-portraits of the past. A "small death" must precede rebirth. One thinks of Dorothea Brooke's searing, night-long vigil in *Middlemarch*, or Isabel Archer's meditation before the fire at the heart of *Portrait of a Lady*. No less than they, Violet is transformed, reborn, by her mock self-destruction.

But her rebirth is assisted by another—a positive alter ego to balance Ambrose's negative *doppelgänger*. Just as Violet is about to pull the Luger's trigger, her female neighbor Sam bursts through the cabin door like a "cosmic joke." Understandably mistaking Violet's performance for the real thing, Sam jumps the spurious suicide and wrestles the gun from her hand. Violet observes of her rescue, "If life imitates art, then you could say that the breakthrough I had been looking for sat astride me . . . screaming obscenities."

The conception of Sam—an elemental, primitive, strong, resourceful woman in contrast to Violet's indecisive, overly cerebral, and self-conscious personality—is a master stroke. But perhaps because Sam's role is almost wholly symbolic, she is never realized as a living character the way Ambrose is. She plays a purely functional role in the novel: by "saving" Violet, and then becoming the subject of Violet's "breakthrough" portraits. But Sam's fuzziness is a minor flaw. In fact, as the "Suspended Woman" of Violet's first successful painting, Sam must remain a universal type—the embodiment of everywoman, "securely netted in layers of light," in the process of becoming.

Most importantly, Sam liberates Violet from the prison of self. When Violet begins to paint Sam rather than herself, she at long last discovers her "vital artistic subject," and transcends her paralyzing aesthetic egoism. She becomes the conveyor of a vision—a medium like Lily Briscoe—rather than the famous painter she had so often fantasized being inter-

viewed in *American Artist* or exhibited in the best galleries on Madison Avenue. Yet, paradoxically, Violet finally unearths her "better self" through turning away from her hungry ego. She emerges as an artist when she grasps that it is her art, her vocation, that matters, not her own individual struggles, failures, or successes. At this point creation ceases to be an act of violation or presumption, but something as natural and necessary as breathing or sleeping: "As long as I could paint, even if I couldn't earn my living . . . even if it was just for myself, I wanted to go on living. Even if I were granted a glimpse of my future in which every art gallery in the world hung a sign on its front door saying: NO NEED TO APPLY INSIDE, VIOLET CLAY THIS MEANS YOU! I would still go on painting because it was something I had to do and something I thought about all the time and something that made me mean and miserable when I wasn't doing it."

How refreshing, even inspiring, this is after the call for instant, often ruthless, self-gratification and self-actualization preached by so much feminist fiction of late. Godwin rejects the label of feminist novelist despite the fact that her work explores the modern woman's psyche and ambivalence in the face of freedom more acutely and powerfully than any other writer I can think of. Perhaps she denies the categorization because she feels it too confining, too manifestly contemporary. For Godwin's roots are in the nineteenth-century novel—in Austen, Eliot, Henry James—and she knows that the attainment of selfhood is no less arduous, though perhaps more baffling and comic, today than it was for her predecessors' heroines. And she knows, too, that in the end it always involves some manner of self-transcendence. Joyce's recipe of silence, exile, and cunning is the same as Violet's, but her struggle also involves such old fashioned and currently unpopular virtues as patience, discipline, and even sacrifice.

Even more, Godwin shares the Victorians' vision of the sanctity of art. With the old faiths dead, much contemporary fiction, especially feminist fiction, celebrates the new religions of relationships and self-realization: the path to salvation ends with getting a man or getting yours. Violet's triumph is that she realizes herself as a woman and an artist through dedication to her work, through attaining a vision that transcends the boundaries of self. But beyond her victory there is something more important than her personal success. In fact, there is something even more valuable than saving one's own life, and that is the Arnoldian performance of art that Violet aspires to touch. "Words dry and riderless, / The indefatigable hoof-taps" is how Plath expressed it in one of her last poems. Godwin's final sentence of *Violet Clay* is scarcely less perfect: "Meanwhile that limitless radiance which eludes us all spins on, taking our day with it, teasing and turning us for a time in its vibrant dimensions, continuing to spread its blind effulgence when we have gone."